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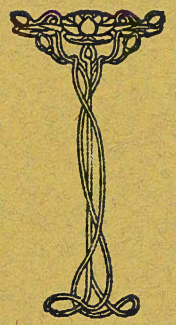
THE INDIAN'S CURSE

A LEGEND OF THE CHEROKEES



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THE INDIAN'S CURSE

A Legend of the Cherokees.

An orphan's curse would drag to Hell
A spirit from on high;
But oh! more horrible than that
Is a curse in a dead man's eye!

—Ancient Mariner.

For many years a fierce and bloody war was waged in North America between the French and the English for possession of the country watered by the eastern tributaries of the Mississippi river. That dispute was ended at last in 1763 by the Treaty of Paris. In this treaty the limits of the English and the French territories in that portion of the world were defined. Thus peace was give to two continents.

While that struggle, called in Europe the Seven Years' War and in America the French and Indian War, was in progress, each side paid assiduous court to the aboriginal tribes of the east. Rivalry for the favor and alliance of the Cherokees was prosecuted by both with extraordinary activity and persistence. Those Indians were not slow to avail themselves of the advantages which such a condition afforded. Their demands for gifts of supplies

and ammunition rapidly increased and were generally acceded to with alacrity. In this way they were encouraged in idleness and impudence. There was no abatement in the extravagance of their claims when hostilities between the French and English closed. They had been taught to overrate their importance, and the lesson could not be recalled.

A sharp competition for trade in their peltries had sprung up between the provinces of North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia, and especially between the two last named. This had continued for a long while. The withdrawal of the French was the signal for its renewal in greater vigor. Already the Cherokees had reached a stage of corrupt worthlessness in which a friend of Indian character had described them as "a nest of apostate hornets." The eagerness of these provinces to secure their trade tended to diminish the value of that trade while it increased the red man's self-esteem and viciousness. Often, it is true, he had grounds of just complaint for wrongs received from his white neighbors. But whether at any time his grievances were real or imaginary, he was ever ready to go on the war-path. Upon any irritation these sons of the forest would rush in squads on some unsuspecting settlement of whites, slaughter every unprotected person whom they found there, and return to their wigwams, with scalps of men, women and children dangling from their belts, to enlist their friends in triumphant orgies for unrestrained perfidy and barbarous deeds of cruelty and blood.

By the end of the first half of the eighteenth century the Cherokees had become accustomed to make these murderous descents from their hiding places in the mountains upon the peaceful white settlers who inhabited the lower country in North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia; and the lives of the residents of those colonies were in constant peril.

Then, too, the evils of existing circumstances were aggravated by the quarrels which now began between the mother country and the colonies. The War of the Revolution soon broke out and the English set to work most earnestly to obtain, through the agency of John Stuart and Alexander Cameron, the friendship and assistance of the Cherokees. In this they were successful. Despite the outspoken protests of Edmund Burke and other humane English statesmen, plans were at once formed to incite the ferocity of these vindictive hordes against those Americans who declined to continue subjects of a half-German idiot.

The Cherokees, finding the States of North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia engaged in a war with a foreign power which required in its conduct all their energies and resources, were easily aroused to commit those atrocious excesses in which all uncivilized peoples take such keen delight and which it seemed would now go unpunished. So instigated, they perpetrated many outrages on the inhabitants of the states just mentioned, and were particularly active and daring in these depredations during the early part of the year 1776.

Finally those states determined to forego for a while their old jealousies and rivalries and to unite in dealing the desperate marauders a blow not soon to be forgotten. An agreement was entered into by the terms of which a body of North Carolina troops was to invade the Cherokee country and be there met by other troops from South Carolina and still others from Virginia; and the army thus formed was to make a combined attack upon the Indian settlements, killing their warriors, consuming their crops and burning their houses.

General Griffith Rutherford was put in charge of the North Carolina soldiers, while Colonel Williamson commanded those of South Carolina and Colonel William Christian those of Virginia. Colonel Christian's company was delayed and failed to join the expedition.

In September and October, 1776, General Rutherford, with twenty-four hundred North Carolinians, crossed the Blue Ridge at Swannanoa Gap, marched down the Swannanoa, and about two miles above its mouth, at a shoal afterwards called in consequence the War Ford, passed the French Broad. Thence he proceeded up Hominy Creek, and, fording Big Pigeon and Tuckaseigee rivers, went forward over the mountain into the valley of the Tennessee. Near where Franklin in Macon County stands he dispersed a few Cherokees who offered resistance and demolished three of their more important villages and cut down and trampled in the earth large quantities of their standing corn, turning into it cattle which his commissaries carried along for beef. From the valley of the Tennessee he advanced across the mountains to the hostile settlements on Valley river at and beyond the present Andrews. There he tore down their dwellings and spoiled their ungathered maize, as he had done in the Tennessee valley. Returning to the latter, he found arrived there the South Carolina forces under Colonel Williamson, who, after having, upon the way, inflicted much damage on his adversaries, had fallen into an ambuscade of Cherokees designed for General Rutherford near the situation of the modern Franklin and saved himself from ruin only by exceedingly hard fighting.

The conjoint armament then laid waste the abodes and plantations of the Indians some distance further down on the Tennessee river and on several of its tributary streams of North Carolina. Having in this manner desolated thirty or forty towns of the Cherokees and wasted an enormous amount of the ungathered products of their cultivated lands and slain many of their braves and scattered their people, General Rutherford recrossed the Blue Ridge with a total loss to himself of only three or four men.

Soon after this, Colonel Christian at the head of a body of soldiers from Virginia and the part of North Carolina which is now Tennessee executed similar vengeance upon Cherokees living on territory afterward included in the eastern part of the state of Tennessee; just as in the earlier stages of

the undertaking a force of Georgians had punished the Cherokees inhabiting the northern end of their state.

Throughout the following winter, the Cherokees suffered much from famine caused by the destruction of their provisions. Never afterwards were they able to raise an army of nearly such numerical strength as those which they had been accustomed to lead to war. The power of the great nation of the Cherokees had been broken forever. Not until toward the close of the Revolutionary struggle did they rally sufficently to attempt as a tribe to go to the assistance of their British friends. All aid then came too late. The effort was feeble and a small force led by General Pickens quickly reduced them to submission. Finally in 1785, at Hopewell in northern South Carolina, the Treaty of Hopewell was concluded, whereby "the United States grant peace to the Cherokees."

It would be difficult to overestimate the value to the American cause of this expedition under General Rutherford. Had these Indians not been subdued, they could have rendered to their British allies such efficient and extensive aid as would have insured the subjugation of the Southern States and effectually prevented the important battles of Kings Mountain, Cowpens and Guilford Courthouse and the driving of Cornwallis to retreat through North Carolina and to surrender in Virginia. The strength of the Cherokees had before been estimated at two thousand or twenty-five hundred fighting men. With

that number of mercenaries skilled in forest warfare added to the detachments under Furgeson and Tarleton or stationed on the frontier in rear of the Americans, the latter could never have reached Kings Mountain, or would have been annihilated there, and Tarleton would have found Cowpens an easy British victory, and Morgan could never have reached Green, and Corwallis would have had no cause to go to Guilford Courthouse to assail Americans who, in that event, would not have been there or elsewhere in arms. When these things are remembered, it certainly is not too much to say that without the Rutherford Expedition there could have been no Yorktown surrender and no American independence. It should, too, be ever borne in mind that the men who, under Rutherford, overcame the Cherokees were from the same territory whose sons beat the British at Kings Mountain and Cowpens.

There is a tradition connected with this military adventure across the mountains which, viewed in the light of subsequent events, possesses an uncommon interest and suggests the stories told of second-sight in the Highlands of Scotland. It is attached to a well-known fountain in Buncombe County, North Carolina, and has been preserved in one of the old families of that county, as well as among the aborigines who remain in the southwestern portion of the state.

About six miles west of Asheville there is a sulphur spring; and not far distant from it is a series of remarkable bends in Hominy Creek, forming an

S, or double horse-shoe. This spring is now neglected. But in the days which preceded the war for Southern rights, it had one of the most famous hotels in the South. Known for many years as "Deaver's Springs," it was visited every summer by hundreds of Southerners who came in their carriages and spent the greater part of the season there in the enjoyment of as pure and healthy atmosphere and as picturesque scenery as could be found even in that wonderful mountain district. With a profusion of hospitality, an abundance of fresh country products, a salubrity of climate and a beauty of surroundings surpassed nowhere, Deaver's Springs contributed as much as any other hosltery to spread the fame of Western North Carolina as a favorite resort for recreation and recuperation. The accomodations were commodious and comfortable and the summer patronage was characterized by gaiety, elegance and refinement.

This sulphur spring is near the western bank of Caney Branch, a small stream which enters Hominy Creek about a mile below, receiving in that interval the waters of several small streamlets. Near the middle of the great bends or double horse-shoe of Hominy is the mouth of Caney Branch and to the west of that is the smaller bend or horse-shoe opening toward the north, while to the east is the larger bend or horse-shoe opening toward the south.

The tradition above referred to says that General Rutherford, on his way to chastise the Cherokees, after crossing the French Broad river, en-

camped with his followers, for a week, in the peninsular formed by the smaller or western horse-shoe of Hominy Creek; and that while he remained there, some of his men, ignorant that any human being not belonging to the enterprise was nigh, poisoned one of the rivulets affluent to Caney Branch with the purpose of killing some of the numerous wolves that at night prowled around the camp and carried off all edibles left exposed. If the whites supposed that the enemy were not aware of their approach, they were mistaken. The Indians had been apprised of General Rutherford's campaign and its objects before he passed Swannanoa Gap and had stationed sentries to observe his progress and keep them informed of his movements at every step. Three young warriors were lurking in the proximity of this encampment in order to watch the incursion and communicate promptly to their fellows at home whatever they might discover. Such communication was effected by signal smokes. A column of smoke from a selected peak near the sulphur spring could be seen by another party of watchers near the head of Hominy and the latter could correspond in the same way with a third party on a mountain miles beyond,, and so until the news had reached the Cherokee headquarters. Of the three youths who composed the outlook near the sulphur spring, the names of all have been forgotten except that of Chee-squi-ah. One of the others was an uncle of the mother of Yo-na-gus-ka, afterwards noted as the greatest chieftain of the Cherokees since Oconostota and Atacullaculla.

This youthful patriot, the grand-uncle of Yo-na-gus-ka, while secretly inspecting Rutherford's camp, chanced to drink of the infected stream. Perceiving that he was poisoned and could not survive and grieved at a death he deemed ignoble and indignant at an act he regarded as cowardly and inexpressibly base, he told his two companions what had befallen him and denounced the treachery of which he thought himself the victim. They bore him to a thicket at hand and there hid him and themselves until his doom had been determined. At that place he soon expired. They buried him, in a sitting posture, on the northwestern side of a white oak hard by the place of their concealment. That white oak is yet standing and has been known for many years as the Township Tree, because it was in the line which divided two townships of the county. The grave, too, is quite plainly to be seen. Once the mound was three or more feet high, but it has been reduced by the rains and freezes until now it is only a foot in elevation above the surrounding earth.

For more than one hundred years this tree and the grave beside it have been familiarly associated throughout the country around with the fate of the unhappy Cherokee. Children there are told in jest that if they will go to the tree and knock on it three times with the naked fist and, after a short pause, ask in a low voice, "Indian, what did you die for?" the answer will be nothing at all. The children understand by this, not that they will get no answer

at all, but that, by way of answer, they will hear a voice from the dead replying in the words, "Nothing at all." When, after the experiment, they complain of the want of a response, the jester laughingly says, "I told you that the answer would be nothing at all." Sometimes older children who have learned the trick hide behind the tree when an inquiry is about to be propounded and answer in the words which the inquirer had been warned to expect, generally to his great terror.

But the strange part of the story remains to be told.

When the young Indian was dying, he called on the god whom he worshipped and solemnly invoked a curse on those who had poisoned the water, as well as on the vicinity where he was about to perish and on all who should become in any way associated with it. The curse seems to have been in a great measure realized. For about half of the time which has elapsed since its occupation by the whites began, the property so cursed has been in litigation. Some of the suits have been between members of the same family and many of them protracted, expensive and very bitter. Those who have claimed the spring or been connected with it, have, more than a few of them, been subjects of serious misfortunes. Financial ruins, law suits, domestic infelicities, separations, divorces, brawls, violent deaths, fires, insanities, suicides, shipwrecks, family quarrels and other distresing afflictions have been of so frequent occurrence among them that almost

not one has escaped the vengeance which apparently impended over all concerned in the location. One owner alone, in addition to numerous other dire calamities, had eighteen houses burned on it while it belonged to him.

Such a record of disasters as is here exhibited probably exists in relation to no other spot on the American continent. Such a combination and continuation of mishaps, coupled with the Indian's anathema, display a preeminence of inexplicable coincidences. To the superstitious it exceeds mere coincidence and becomes a case of fearful retributions.

This curse surpasses, in the malignity of its imprecation and the magnitude of its fulfillment, all the celebrated curses of literature. The elaborate curse in Tristam Shandy was only by way of preparation for sudden emergencies. The curse of O'Kelly was vicious but harmless. That of the Cardinal Lord Archbishop of Rheims, of which it is said, "Never was heard such a terrible curse," was expressly removed when it was perceived that its effect was restricted to an insignificant jackdaw. The curse of the Welsh bard,

"Weave the warp and weave the woof,
The winding sheet of Edward's race,"

scarcely had a consummation commensurate with its malevolence. But the curse of the young Indian scout, pronounced without candle, bell or book, was fierce in its denunciation and terrific in its accomplishment.

The gentleman who has preserved this tradition is himself a member of the family that owned the place longer than any other and suffered most of them all. He heard the story often in childhood from members of that family and from its neighbors, and, when quite small, tried the spell of knocking on the old white oak and, at the grave, demanding of the dead the gratification of his childish curiosity. All of this preceded many of the grave and singular sufferings which have come to those who owned or controlled the site. The peculiar afflictions of such persons have long been observed and a frequent subject of comment in the vicinity as an unparalleled verification of a remarkable malediction.

After this gentleman reached manhood, he was engaged, for some time in the year 1881, in business in Graham County, North Carolina. A number of Cherokees resided in that county, then, as they do yet. Among them was a well-known Indian whose appearance indicated unmistakably that his life had been extended far beyond that of any other person whom the visitor had ever seen. The body of the old man was nearly destitute of flesh; his skin hung, like parchment, in loose folds from his emaciated form, his eyes were sunken, and his entire person plainly denoted a being of extraordinary longevity. Other old natives, and particularly a man of patriachal years named Tah-quit-tee, averred that this relic of by-gone days had passed middle life when they were yet small boys. The stranger came to

know intimately this man of many years and often conversed with him in regard to past events. The aged Cherokee spoke freely of his early life. He narrated the details of the poisoning, death, burial and fateful curse of the expiring sentinel, at Sulphur Springs in 1776, the march of Rutherford's host against his nation, the points where it crossed the rivers and mountains, and the terrible devastation which it wrought among his race as the black cloud of war burst, in desolating fury, over the home of his fathers. For he had been one of those sent out to keep watch on the advance of the whites, and had witnessed it all. The old man was Chee-squi-ah.

Fact *is* sometimes stranger than fiction, and "There *are* more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

It may be that the curse of the dying boy is spent, and the Sulphur Springs may yet regain the festive glory of departed years; but round the spot will linger the memory of the youthful Cherokee and of that dread invasion which crushed a people famed for many acts of savage chivalry, and terminated for all time to come the prowess of an ancient nationality.